

FINAL REPORT

Relationship Between Self-Efficacy and Learning
for Elderly Adults and College Students

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Discussion and Summary

The differences between the upper and lower outcome treatment groups and age groups are the ones of major importance. The data indicates that stereotypes influence the elderly's self-efficacy when the stereotypes include an elderly person performing poorly on learning tasks; however they did not influence the elderly's actual beginnings. First, both the young and elderly adults changed their evaluations of their own performance based on the performance of a symbolic person similar to themselves. That is, the vicarious experience influenced the evaluation the elderly and the young made of their performance potential and that of their actual performance. Participants who read a story about a person in their age group who failed tasks similar to the ones they were about to take gave a lower pre-study estimate of anticipated performance than that given by participants who read a story about a person in their age group who passed the tasks. The participants who were in the story group that failed also gave a lower estimate of their actual performance than those in the story group that passed. This post-task outcome difference was also supported since more participants in the group with the failing story gave a score below passing than was found for the group with the passing story. The stories also varied by whether the person

received social support. This form of vicarious experience made no difference for the elderly or the young participants.

This result offered support for Bandura's (1981) theory that self-efficacy, or judgements one makes about one's ability, is determined by vicarious experiences. The participants used another person's success or failure as a reference point to evaluate their own performance. What was particularly interesting about this is that the other person was only a symbolic person in a story; the person was neither a friend nor someone of importance to the participants. Bandura (1981) argued that the effects of vicarious experience are generally weaker than one's own personal experience at a task; however, in this study, the participants in the group with the passing story continued to give higher post-task estimates of their performance than those with the failing story even when there was no actual difference in performance. This indicates that stereotypes may, in certain situations, be at least as powerful as performance accomplishment. This is probably found when one does not know one's actual performance and when the tasks are difficult. Strength was added to the results since both these elderly and the young adults could be classified as having more success with tasks such as these learning task. If this group is influenced by stereotypes, then other groups of elderly and young adults should be at least as influenced, if not more.

The data indicates that social stereotypes which show the elderly performing poorly at a task did influence one aspect of the elderly's cognitive performance whereas learning about support for the actions of a symbolic person appeared to have little effect upon the elderly. Cultural stereotypes that indicate that the elderly perform poorly on learning tasks do add to the elderly's evaluation of themselves as too old to learn. The fact that the same effect was found for the undergraduate students was surprising but points out the pervasiveness of such stereotyping. It appears that even a group of intellectually bright students are not impervious to symbolic modeling. Such data suggests that simply encouraging an elderly person that they can perform well on learning tasks (support treatment) is not an adequate approach to changing their evaluation of their performance ability. Instead, the elderly need to interact with older models, either real or symbolic, that are performing well. This should improve their self-evaluation of their ability.

According to Bandura (1977) and Cavanaugh and Perlmutter (1982) self-efficacy evaluations related to learning in that they determine how much effort one will give to a specific task; how persistent one will be in the face of obstacles; how efficient one will be in performing the task; and even whether learning behavior will be initiated in the first place. This data did not indicate that one's actual performance was lowered by vicarious experience therefore self-efficacy was not related to learning for either age

group. It may be that the most pervasive effect of lowered self-evaluation is the unwillingness to perform the task in the first place or to complete it when the task becomes too challenging. Due to the experimental procedure of this study, the elderly (or young) could not easily avoid beginning the learning tasks or quit persisting early on. As such, the relationship between the differences in the self-efficacy evaluations and the elderly's willingness to approach a learning task and persist at it could not be evaluated by this study. Tracey Fellowes, a graduate student in our department, is studying this question. To summarize, the elderly's actual cognitive performance may not be influenced by stereotypes if they attempt the tasks and persist at it; however, the elderly's lower evaluation due to cultural stereotypes may lower their motivation to continue a difficult task or may even stop them from attempting most learning tasks in the first place.

In summary, the elderly are influenced by stereotypes about their intellectual abilities. Being exposed to a symbolic event about the elderly, such as that viewed on television, partially determines the elderly's opinion of themselves. It is therefore very important that we present the older learner as a competent learner. This can help the older adults view themselves as good enough to learn new information.

Figure One

Percentage of Young and Elderly Adults Giving a Passing or Failing Pre-task Metamemory Performance Prediction

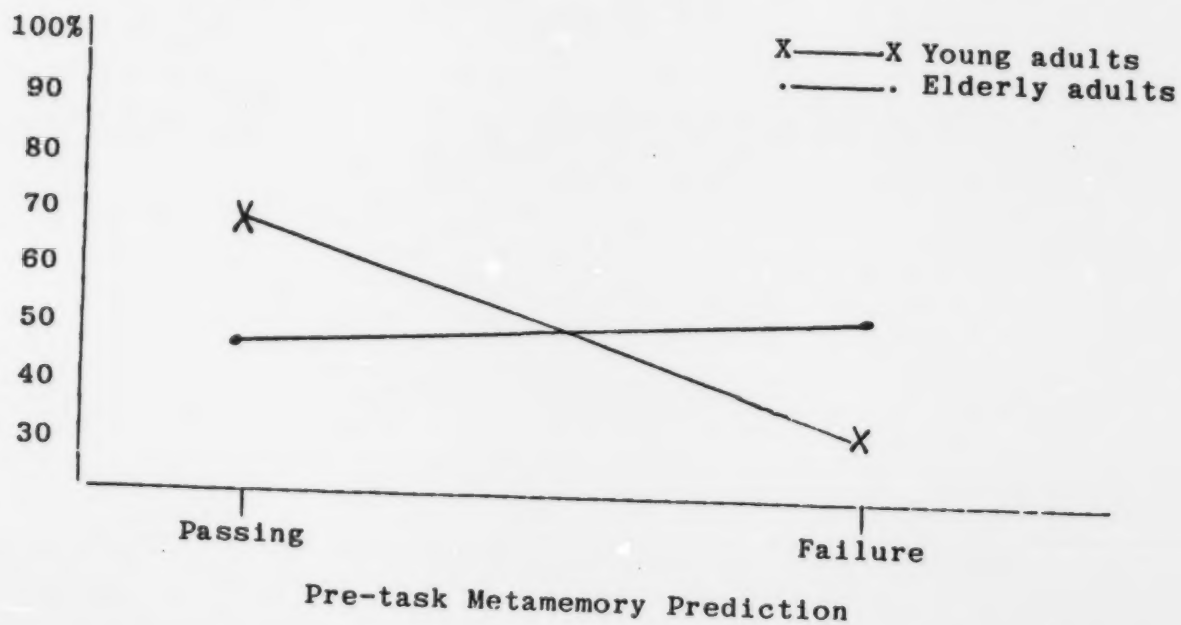


Figure Two

Percentage of Upper and Lower Outcome Groups Giving a Passing or Failing Post-task Metamemory Performance Prediction

